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The Lessons of the Zimbabwe Liberation War
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# Chimurenga!

**The Lessons of the Zimbabwe Liberation War**

Anarchist Revolutionary Movement

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needs revolutionary ideology and independent nonheirachical grassroot bodies.



THE VICTORY OF a seemingly militant ZANU (Zimbabwe African National Union) in Zimbabwe's 1980 independence elections, following a long guerrilla war (the Chimurenga") against White colonialism, was greeted with jubilation. Today, the hopes raised have dissipated; modern Zimbabwe (formerly Rhodesia) is marked by continuity with colonial social and economic structures. This article examines, from a radical perspective, why the national liberation struggle failed to achieve its basic goals, and the lessons this holds for struggle today.

## FAILURE OF THE GUERRILLA WAR

Land, central to the war, remains in the hands of White commercial farmers and a Black elite, whilst most Zimbabweans are condemned to a life of poverty.

Independence has brought them few benefits; wage levels are in fact those of twenty years ago; unemployment is growing; and the living standards of the urban poor, 30% of the population, are declining. An International Monetary Fund /World Bank imposed Structural Adjustment Programme (SAP) aggravates and intensifies these hardships, bringing rising prices, reduced buying power, and cuts in social services like education.

Meanwhile the politicians and State bosses award themselves pay hikes, encourage investment by the exploitative multi national corporations, and strengthen diplomatic ties with the imperialist West. The ruling class (White farmers and Black elite) sustains its power and privilege by repression. Only recently was the 25 year long State of Emergency lifted, whilst police permission is necessary for large political gatherings, strikes can be banned, the press is suppressed, and the Central Intelligence Organisation harasses dissidents.

## SOME EXPLANATIONS CRITIQUED

The failure of the ZANU government to deliver is sometimes lamed on ”external” factors. For example, the independence constitution, agreed upon by guerrilla leaders and the colonialists, placed strong restrictions on land reform[1].

But this explanation assumes the new regime really did want to change Zimbabwe in the interests of the masses. In fact, w will show below, nothing could be further from the truth. Others, mainly Marxists, say that the outcome results from he fact that the war was fought by peasants. Actually there is nothing inherently conservative about peasants, as peasants have played a leading role in fighting for radical aims e.g. Mexico 1911.

## OUTLINE OF THE WAR

For a proper explanation let us look at what actually happened the Zimbabwe war.

Rhodesia was a White settler colony set up in 1896, which featured the rapid, State directed development of a racial capitalist system in which Whites had a monopoly of economic and political power[2][3]. Just as all White classes were racially privileged, workers included, all Black classes ere discriminated against.

The 1950s saw struggles by Black trade unions, peasant communities, and nationalist groups for national liberation. A nationalist perspective (cross class alliance to achieve a national” State and economy) predominated in this national liberation movement.

[1] A. Astrow, 1983, Zimbabwe: a revolution that lost its way? Chapter 6

[2] L. Cliffe, 1981, ”Zimbabwe’s Political Inheritance” in C. Stoneman (ed.), Zimbabwe’s Inheritance

[3] M. Loney, Rhodesia, Chapter 3



## LANCASTER HOUSE AND BEYOND

The settlement reached at Lancaster House was not the betrayal but the climax of the nationalist programme, as it gave the Black middle class opportunities in the State, State corporations, and private sector.

Subsequently, this group moved rapidly to consolidate its position. First it incorporated the hurundwende, guerrilla forces, trade unions and women’s groups into the State and ZANU. Second repression was freely used against dissent.

Thirdly, the Black bourgeoisie ”reconciled” itself with its White counterparts, buying commercial farms, assuming senior positions in private corporations, and giving the White upper class prominent positions and a large say in the running of the State.

## FOR REVOLUTION: LESSONS OF STRUGGLE

At present urban workers and students, spurred by disillusionment, hardship, and SAP, are at the forefront of struggle with the regime. At the same time the growing frustration of the land hungry peasantry alarms the boss class.

The regime has sought to deal with the unrest by repression for example, closure of the University, and breaking up protest meetings. It has also promised to speed up the pace of land reform, a small victory, although major change is unlikely given the crisis in the ruling class this could cause.

Unfortunately, the ongoing struggle is presently tending to reformism, and many believe the solution is to simply vote ZANU out of office. This strategy is flawed. The lessons of the Zimbabwe war, for South Africa as much as for Zimbabwe, are that: struggle must aim to overthrow of capitalism and State; that national liberation needs a class perspective; that struggle

Even ZANU, which in the latter stages of the war claimed to be socialist, believed that a "national democratic" stage had to take place first[22].

## CONTRADICTIONS IN NATIONALISM

By 1976, a substantial opposition to this programme emerged in a number of cases amongst guerrillas, women of all ages, landless young men, and poor peasants[23][24].

They seized empty farms, rustled White owned cattle, and vigorously participated in the hurundwende. Women challenged lobola (bride wealth), polygamy, demanded male involvement in child rearing and State provided nurseries, leadership training, better education, and guerrilla training. Guerrillas and poor peasants evicted 100s of rich peasants, occasionally attacked wealthy homesteads, and expressed increasing hostility to Black businessmen.

However, these class conscious, anti patriarchal tendencies never came to predominate in the national liberation struggle. For one thing, no alternative political programme to that of the nationalists emerged. Secondly, the Black middle class was able to contain these contradictions: they used their influence in the hurundwende to bolster patriarchy, and businessmen also set up working arrangements with the guerrillas.[25]

[22] A. Astrow, 1983, Zimbabwe: a revolution that lost its way? Chapter 6

[23] L. Cliffe, 1981, "Zimbabwe's Political Inheritance" in C. Stoneman (ed.), Zimbabwe's Inheritance

[24] D. Phimister, 1988, "The Combined and Contradictory Inheritance of the Struggle in Zimbabwe," in C. Stoneman (ed.) Zimbabwe's Prospects

[25] D. Phimister, 1988, "The Combined and Contradictory Inheritance of the Struggle in Zimbabwe," in C. Stoneman (ed.) Zimbabwe's Prospects



The response of the White State was mainly repression. ZANU, and ZAPU (Zimbabwe African People's Union), the two main nationalist parties, were banned, after which they turned to armed struggle, with incursions from 1966 on. Inflexible, conspicuous, and isolated from the peasants, these early campaigns were failures[4][5].

Change came when, in 1972, operating from a FRELIMO (Front for Liberation of Mozambique) liberated zone, ZANU's army, ZANLA (Zimbabwe African National Liberation Army) began to mobilise and politicise the Black peasantry in eastern

Zimbabwe as part of its war effort. This strategy of "peoples war" created what was effectively a peasant insurrection and turned the tide against the colonial regime[6][7]. War intensified through the 1970s. From 1976, ZIPRA (Zimbabwe People's Revolutionary Army), the ZAPU army, also recommenced operations, mainly in the southwest. ZIPRA did not however try mobilising the peasants[8][9].

Under pressure from the guerrilla war, and an international isolation campaign, the regime tried on a number of occasions to negotiate an end to the war. Finally, in the 1979 Lancaster House agreement, it made its terms with ZANU and ZAPU, and a new constitution was written, and date for independence elections set.

[4] L. Cliffe, 1981, "Zimbabwe's Political Inheritance" in C. Stoneman (ed.), Zimbabwe's Inheritance

[5] J. Saul, 1979, "Transforming the Struggle in Zimbabwe" in his State and Revolution in Eastern Africa.

[6] L. Cliffe, 1981, "Zimbabwe's Political Inheritance" in C. Stoneman (ed.), Zimbabwe's Inheritance

[7] Cliffe, L., Mpofu, J. and B. Munslow, 1980, "Nationalist Politics in Zimbabwe" in Review of African Political Economy, no. 18

[8] L. Cliffe, 1981, "Zimbabwe's Political Inheritance" in C. Stoneman (ed.), Zimbabwe's Inheritance

[9] D. Phimister, 1988, "The Combined and Contradictory Inheritance of the Struggle in Zimbabwe," in C. Stoneman (ed.) Zimbabwe's Prospects

## PEOPLES POWER AND STRUGGLE IDEOLOGY

By this time, some very important developments had taken place in ZANLA zones.

Here the guerrillas had set up a sophisticated system of non State grassroots decision making bodies. These "people's committees" (hurundwende), at village, ward, and district level, provided support for the guerrillas, political mobilisation of the peasants, and civil administration[10][11][12]. Health, education, and other self help schemes were also sometimes initiated by the hurundwende[13]. At a separate level of mobilisation, the guerrillas used young men (mujhibas) and women (chimbwidos) secure the area, collect peasant contributions, carry messages, and (in the case of the chimbwidos) cook and clean[14].

Mujhibas and chimbwidos also organised regular, nighttime village meetings (pungwes) at which the guerrillas explained why they were fighting, and taught nationalist slogans and songs[15], thus building a culture of resistance.

## THE ROAD TO LANCASTER HOUSE

The war therefore involved the creation of grassroots structures and beliefs independent of, and in opposition to, the

[10] L. Cliffe, 1981, "Zimbabwe's Political Inheritance" in C. Stoneman (ed.), Zimbabwe's Inheritance

[11] Cliffe, L., Mpofu, J. and B. Munslow, 1980, "Nationalist Politics in Zimbabwe" in Review of African Political Economy, no. 18

[12] D. Phimister, 1988, "The Combined and Contradictory Inheritance of the Struggle in Zimbabwe," in C. Stoneman (ed.) Zimbabwe's Prospects

[13] Cliffe, L., Mpofu, J. and B. Munslow, 1980, "Nationalist Politics in Zimbabwe" in Review of African Political Economy, no. 18

[14] Cliffe, L., Mpofu, J. and B. Munslow, 1980, "Nationalist Politics in Zimbabwe" in Review of African Political Economy, no. 18

[15] Cliffe, L., Mpofu, J. and B. Munslow, 1980, "Nationalist Politics in Zimbabwe" in Review of African Political Economy, no. 18



White State. These events could have laid the basis of a new, revolutionary society of direct democracy, production for use, and distribution for need.

Why did this not occur?

The activity and further development of the hurundwende was limited by the fact that Black peasant lands were scattered amongst White areas, and thus not only quite vulnerable to attack, but unable to generate and maintain a fully operating alternative infrastructure. Furthermore, hurundwende were absent from many areas, and had no city counterparts[16][17].

Even where they did exist, no attempt was made to restructure production in a non capitalist direction[18]. And hurundwende were also usually dominated by "respectable" local community members: rich peasants, Black businessmen, professionals[19][20]. The middle class also dominated leadership positions in ZANU, ZAPU, ZANLA and ZIPRA. Its class power was reinforced by the authoritarian structures of the guerrilla armies, which were directed by central councils situated outside Zimbabwe.

As for the ideology propagated by the guerrillas and the parties, it fell far short of a radical social critique. The nationalists aimed not to overthrow, but to establish capitalism with a Black face, an ambition reflecting the frustrations of the Black middle class leadership[21] [7].

Armed struggle was adopted as a last resort to achieve this.

[16] Cliffe, L., Mpofu, J. and B. Munslow, 1980, "Nationalist Politics in Zimbabwe" in Review of African Political Economy, no. 18

[17] L. Cliffe, 1981, "Zimbabwe's Political Inheritance" in C. Stoneman (ed.), Zimbabwe's Inheritance

[18] Cliffe, L., Mpofu, J. and B. Munslow, 1980, "Nationalist Politics in Zimbabwe" in Review of African Political Economy, no. 18

[19] Cliffe, L., Mpofu, J. and B. Munslow, 1980, "Nationalist Politics in Zimbabwe" in Review of African Political Economy, no. 18

[20] D. Phimister, 1988, "The Combined and Contradictory Inheritance of the Struggle in Zimbabwe," in C. Stoneman (ed.) Zimbabwe's Prospects

[21] A. Astrow, 1983, Zimbabwe: a revolution that lost its way? Chapter 6